

Military Intelligence Basic Officer Leader Course

Van Deman Program

Fort Huachuca, AZ

COIN PAPER

EAST TURKISTAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT (ETIM)

GOES FOR INSURGENT GOLD AT OLYMPICS:

A STUDY OF CHINA'S INFORMATION WARFARE

by

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Class 08-006

31 July 2008

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 31 JUL 2008		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2008 to 00-00-2008	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE East Turkistan Independence Movement (ETIM) Goes for Insurgent Gold at Olympics: A Study of China's Information Warfare				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) University of Military Intelligence,Fort Huachuca,Sierra Vista,AZ,85613				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 10	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

*"As much as al-Qaeda is part of any discussion about terrorism in the US, so are Uyghur separatists the focus of terrorism talk in China."*¹ (Michael Manning, 2007)

GOING FOR GOLD – A PLAUSIBLE SCENARIO²

A few days have past since the opening ceremony for the Beijing Olympics was executed without incident. There is a noticeable feeling of relief from top officials, as terrorism concerns have mostly subsided. The spotlight of the world is on China and it is highlighting all that seems good and decent about the new modern and open China. Reporters, fat on free accommodations and giddy from grandiose treatment, write complimentary stories about how economic prosperity is reducing historical religious, regional and ethnic grievances.

Then three simultaneous car bombs are detonated at different checkpoints on the perimeter of Beijing, killing a total of 3 soldiers and slightly injuring 5 civilians. The Chinese immediately place the blame on the Muslim Uyghurs (or Uighurs) of Xinjiang Province, specifically the East Turkistan Independence Movement (ETIM). The Chinese Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) beings to roll and the far west Chinese province is placed under siege.

Almost as fast, the thousands of International Press mobilize and prepare to exit Beijing and head west to cover the Chinese crackdown. They calculate that this will be the story most will tune in to watch. But, as they drive to the first checkpoint out of town, they are stopped, told to turn back. There will be no press coverage. The official reason is that it is not safe. The People's Republic of China (PRC) promises to assist the press by reporting the story for them.

THESIS – CHINA'S INFORMATION WARFARE (IW) TACTICS WILL SUFFOCATE ETIMs AMBITION

The Uyghur, like the better-known Tibetans, have been in a low-level rebellion since China became communist in 1949. After 9-11, the Chinese lumped Uyghur issues in with the "global war on terrorism (GWOT)" and attempted to align the Chinese cause with the US in an

attempt to gain legitimacy. The thesis of this paper will expose China's comprehensive and relentless IW strategy. It will also show the many methods the Chinese use that are unpalatable to a Western sensibility. First, there is China's IW tactics; second, their crack-downs are reported to be harsh and draconian, and finally, their long-term strategy is a form of forced assimilation. With the now-widespread access to internet (even though China tries to block it), mass-media and communication, there is serious concern whether this strategy and its tactics will be sustainable.

BEGINNINGS OF AN INSURGENCY – THE ETIM CAUSE

The Uyghur are Muslims with an ethnic mix of Mongolian, Turkic and Tibetan. They have settled in the area since recorded history and they think of themselves as distinctly different from the Chinese. The majority of Uyghur live in the oil, gas and uranium-rich western province of China, officially named "Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region." The autonomous designation is important because China has 5 provinces where Han Chinese are in the minority, and designates them autonomous in a bid to give an appearance of self-government. The PRC allows the local population to choose its own local government, but the real power is wielded by a Party Secretary who is appointed by the central Chinese government (PRC). Any decision of consequence is thus tightly controlled, scrutinized and pro-Chinese, in turn creating what Mao would refer to as an "unresolved contradiction."³ This state of powerlessness is the grievance behind the Uyghur main cause, which is to achieve independence for a Uyghur nation.

The main and best known active insurgent group within the Uyghur population is known as ETIM (or recently East Turkistan Islamic Movement or Turkistan Islamic Party). And, while not widely discussed outside of China, they are "considered to be more of a problem (for the PRC) than Tibet or Taiwan."⁴ Beginning in the 1940s, the movement resisted local warlords, then later the Communist Chinese "occupation".⁵ But, their resistance movements were kept fairly meager as their "fractured tribal nature" failed to generate overall momentum.⁶ The ETIM have stalled in stage one of a "protracted popular war."⁷

The Cold War had a dampening effect on the insurgency as neighboring Muslim populations had other pressing concerns. For example, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, were Soviet satellites and Afghanistan was the battleground for an all-out global Islamic Jihad. But, the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan, the fall of communism and the nascent statehoods of the above mentioned Islamic neighbors reinvigorated the movement for the 1990's. Further, some ETIM members travelled to neighboring Afghanistan to train with Al Qaeda. This development narrowed ETIM's cause to include the desire for an independent Islamic state. Also, the Chinese became increasingly heavy-handed in the 1990's in reaction to the group activities, in turn adding to the Uyghur cause fighting state oppression in general.

INSURGENT AND COUNTER INSURGENT TACTICS

As mentioned, the ETIM movement has been stuck in the initial stages of their movement, mostly due to the effectiveness of China's totalitarian-style policing. To gain notoriety and use the limited tools at their disposal, the ETIM has conducted terrorist acts, such as bombings and assassinations.⁸ Most recently it is their threats against the Olympics that are garnering world-wide publicity.⁹

The most interesting and valuable aspects of this struggle that are relevant to the US are the counterinsurgency tactics. ETIM could not have a more menacing opponent, as the origins of the current Chinese ruling party is based on insurgency. In other words, Chairman Mao wrote the book! He captured the essence of (counter) insurgency and built the current Chinese "political machine from the population upward."¹⁰

China uses IW comprehensively against the Uyghur to control the population and enforce the "counter-cause." Galula in his classic book "Counterinsurgency Warfare" classifies propaganda as a "secondary tool."¹¹ Perhaps, he didn't foresee how far China would raise this art form, and how powerful its effect would be in the information age. For example, Galula states, "the counterinsurgent is tied to his responsibilities and his past."¹² Yet for example, China has effectively erased Tiananmen Square from the consciousness of its 1.3 billion citizens.

Since Mao's failed "Great Leap Forward", and the resulting attempt to cover it up and re-write history, the Chinese have revered the art of IW. Indeed, from the "Cultural Revolution" to "Tiananmen Square" to the present Olympics they have made many mistakes from which they have learned hard lessons. Today China makes facts difficult to corroborate, thus adding uncertainty and obfuscating every journalists report. A glaring example is the how China balked at running live broadcasts for the 2008 Olympics. Skillfully, they backed-down on that requirement, but keep a tight leash on a press because expectations of openness are lowered:

"Despite a temporary loosening of regulations applying to foreign journalists in China in the run-up to the Olympics, control over both foreign and Chinese journalists remained tight, and many Chinese journalists were imprisoned for reporting on sensitive subjects. In April, the Ministry of Public Security reportedly ordered the screening of all those attending the Beijing Olympics, with 43 categories of people to be barred, including some based on political or religious beliefs."¹³ (Amnesty International, State of the World's Human Rights 2008)

The vast quantity of information that comes from China is, in fact, disinformation. An excellent example is from the Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, who have a mission statement/slogan of "Publicize China. Report the World." They have a detailed history of Xinjiang province that heavily emphasizes the multi-ethnic history of the region, thus delegitimizing the Uyghur-specific claim to independence. They also use it to promote their overall counterinsurgency strategy that economic prosperity will override any grievance. The concluding line sums it up well, "It is the common wish of the people of all the ethnic groups in Xinjiang, as well as the strategic plan of the central government, to speed up Xinjiang's development."¹⁴

Fighting back against the Chinese Information warriors is proving difficult so far. ETIMs initial, but feeble, attempt at IW is to align itself with the popular Tibetan movement, but the result has been met with mostly global indifference. However, backing up the Islamic Uyghurs is AI

Jazeera who are reporting that there is great discrimination against Uyghur during the most recent economic expansion. Reports state that it is only the Han Chinese who are benefitting.¹⁵ Further, it could get even more interesting if Al-Qaeda, itself a proven grandmaster at IW, ever decides to focus its Information Jihad on China. While Al-Qaeda may envy China's totalitarian ways, they will find them a difficult adversary, and not as easy to manipulate as the US. It is difficult to imagine Muslims writing critical Op-Ed pieces in China, much less holding student Visas in mainland China and planning sophisticated attacks without overbearing surveillance. This reality has direct implications for the US, if terrorist groups consistently see the US as a softer and more appealing target.

The events of 9-11 changed the international landscape significantly. Quickly realizing this, China had ETIM added to the US and UN's "terror watch list" within the year. Interestingly, the US government is of two minds over the Uyghur issue. The CIA has no problem calling ETIM terrorists, at the same time the State department writes about the Uyghur being an oppressed people. The Council on Foreign Relations writes that "The United States accused China of using the war on terrorism as an excuse to suppress political dissent in Xinjiang."¹⁶ There seems to be a parallel with the Israel-Palestine issue, while we support Israel's right to defend itself, we recognize that the Palestinians' have legitimate grievances.

In the run-up to the Olympics, propaganda and counter-terror activity has been furious. The activity began as monthly, then weekly and is now daily, with reports of killings, detainments, and terror plots being broken up. It truly sounds like they are "prepping the information environment" to counter anything spectacular. Most recently, the US commented in reference to China's crackdown:

"Security threats have to be dealt with and that is fully understood by everybody, but security should not become in any way a cover to try and deal with dissent."¹⁷ (Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, 26 July 2008)

Though even with all this propaganda work, it seems to have nothing but a negative “otherness” effect on the global population. The Chinese are a people about whom others will do business and not ask questions. The truth is difficult to come by, and when it does it is usually damning for the Chinese. And, if they do have anything positive it is always in question.

"We will firmly take control of the initiative in the struggle and resolutely oppose hostile forces inside and outside China who use ethnic issues to infiltrate and sabotage."

(President Hu Jintao in a 28 May 2005 speech quoted in Taipei Times)¹⁸

LONG TERM STRATEGY

A long term approach is through resettlement policies, which “as in Tibet...have resulted in a sharp increase of Han Chinese amongst the population. The number of residents has increased from 200,000 to 6 million over the past 30 years.”¹⁹ Chinese strategy here is to eliminate a central grievance to all insurgencies: “the opposition to foreigners.” (Polk, pg. xiii) Moving Han Chinese from the heavily populated east into the region with ever increasing numbers would make the Uyghur minorities in their own land. Much like the way many observers view an Arab strategy to the problem of Israel, having a higher birth rate is perhaps the original tactic in a war of attrition. China’s well-known one-child program also works very well for them in this regard, leaving the Uyghur no chance to counter the effects of Han immigration.

As for Islam, China employs a tactic of only allowing Imams who are government employees teach and practice their religion. In anticipation that this policy may alienate Islamic countries; China actively seeks out deals, such as with Saudi Arabia and Algeria in 1999, where both countries issued statements supporting China’s “right to protect its territorial integrity” in return for undisclosed business deals.²⁰

But, China’s most famous tactic is to execute and incarcerate, which it does very efficiently and, critically, with almost no foreign press coverage. Numbers are difficult to come by, but estimates are that hundreds have been killed and thousands detained. Amnesty International,

cites a laundry list of atrocities. Amongst these atrocities are allegations of real torture, not the legally ambiguous type we in the US have been exposed to in the past few years.²¹ Not having clear numbers or pictures, is another sign of victory in an IW battle.

CONCLUSION

“the question is - do YOU, as a white, liberal, sinophobic american, want the olympics to go smoothly?[sic]” (hwang, commenter on a Nicholoas Kristof opinion piece in the NYTimes on 29 May 2008, exemplifies well the Chinese paranoia driving their IW.)²²

China has been loosening up economic laws slowly with great success and they may have to do the same with religious freedoms. Religious fervor is not something that is easily swept away with propaganda, be it Islam, Falun Gong or Christianity. That said, many analysts are at a loss to explain how they can achieve such great economic results without the corresponding freedoms. Western analysts need to step out of their pre-determined models that think freedom is necessary.

“Everyone says that China will be the next scientific and economic power. Is this compatible with their ongoing rejection of open debate and exploration of ideas? Is a technologically advanced society compatible with anti-intellectualism and suppression of debate? It's hard to see how China will ever compete with the West as a source of scientific and technological innovation if ideas cannot be discussed and evaluated.”²³
(Steven Pinker, Edge Magazine)

Even so, the Chinese could turn out to be more flexible strategically than the US. Firstly, they have a much longer and much more recent history of fighting insurgents. When references to the Minute Men and revolutionaries are taught to US soldiers, the distance is too great to create a feeling of continuity. Even if we learned well from Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, those are not our insurgencies because we don't live there. Polk in his history of Guerilla Warfare “Violent Politics” makes a very interesting point; that is even though Washington experienced

most of his success through the use of Guerrillas, he had disdain for them. It was as if fighting small and dirty was beneath him. The Chinese have no such compunctions and the Chinese population has faith that their government is acting in the collective best interest.

As was explained in this paper, the Chinese have a well-developed IW apparatus and the willingness to use it to its fullest potential. But, even the Chinese admit that key aspects of their censorship strategy are failing.²⁴ The US must seize this opportunity to learn and develop its own IW systems. For example, the US could even possibly exploit this opportunity by continuing its tradition of proxy wars, by indirectly supporting ETIM. Many observers believe we are already engaged with them in an information war. And, perhaps most importantly, we could finally leverage the nascent Islamic awakening and redirect some of that energy towards China. Indeed, China is already experiencing some anti-Chinese Islamic terrorism in Pakistan.²⁵

However, this latest round of globalism is still in its pre-teen years and we need a steady hand and self-confidence. No matter how attractive China's techniques may seem from a retributive and kinetic perspective. It will only continue and may even exacerbate the problem. If we wish to win our insurgent wars, we must become a little like the population we are supporting. (i.e. become a little-bit Iraqi or Afghan and they in turn must become a little like us.) For example, a Chinese future could involve continuing the slow decentralization of the Chinese central government, with provisions to stay under a looser Chinese version of Federalism, much like Quebec and the First Nations in Canada. After all, Galula thought Quebec was on a revolutionary course in 1965²⁶, and 40 years later almost no blood was shed and the Canadian government made soft concessions that were unthinkable (and unpalatable to a majority of Canadians), yet mostly effective.

¹ http://china.otspecial.org/archives/2007/06/comparative_lit.html -Last accessed 29 Jul 2008

² I wrote this before the latest (26 Jul 2008) threats from the ETIM were publicized. I mention this because it could have been copy-pasted from this weekends press. It seems Chinese counter terrorism units believe this scenario is very plausible.

³ Galula, David, LTC. "Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice." Praeger Security International, Westport, CT. pg. 14

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- ⁴ Dillon, Michael., *Xinjiang -- China's Muslim Far Northwest*. Routledge Curzon, New York, NY. 2004. pg. 156.
- ⁵ http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/china_evolution_etim - Last accessed 28 Jul 2008
- ⁶ <http://www.cdi.org/terrorism/etim.cfm> - Last accessed 19 Jul 2008
- ⁷ O'Neill, Bard E., "Insurgency and Terrorism" Potomac Books, Dulles, VA, 2005. Pg. 50.
- ⁸ Stratfor, "The Evolution of ETIM", 13 May 2008
- ⁹ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/china/article4406836.ece> - Last accessed 27 Jul 2008
- ¹⁰ Galula, pg. 95.
- ¹¹ Galula pg. 14.
- ¹² Galula pg. 9.
- ¹³ <http://thereport.amnesty.org/eng/regions/asia-pacific/china> - Last accessed 26 Jul 2008
- ¹⁴ http://news.xinhuanet.com/zhengfu/2003-06/12/content_916306.htm - Last accessed 26 Jul 2008
- ¹⁵ <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia-pacific/2008/03/2008525184819409441.html> - Last accessed 26 Jul 2008
- ¹⁶ <http://www.cfr.org/publication/9179/#8> – Last accessed 25 Jul 2008
- ¹⁷ <http://malaysia.news.yahoo.com/ap/20080726/tap-as-oly-us-china-olympics-bb10fb8.html> - Last accessed 26 Jul 2008
- ¹⁸ <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2005/05/29/2003257059> - Last accessed 19 Jul 2008
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- ²⁰ <http://www.muslimmedia.com/archives/world99/china-arab.htm> - Last accessed 27 Jul 2008
- ²¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/apr/05/china.tibet> -Last accessed 25 Jul 2008
- ²² <http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/29/your-comments-on-my-olympics-column/> - Last accessed 27 Jul 2008
- ²³ http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/dangerous08/dangerous08_index.html - Last accessed 27 Jul 2008
- ²⁴ http://technology.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/tech_and_web/the_web/article2086419.ece - Last accessed 27 Jul 2008
- ²⁵ Guang, Pan, "East Turkestan Terrorism and the Terrorist Arc: China's Post-9/11 Anti-Terror Strategy", THE CHINA AND EURASIA FORUM QUARTERLY · Volume 4. No.2
- ²⁶ Galula, pg. xiv.